



Europäisches Patentamt  
European Patent Office  
Office européen des brevets



(11) **EP 1 038 948 A1**

(12) **EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION**

(43) Date of publication:  
27.09.2000 Bulletin 2000/39

(51) Int. Cl.<sup>7</sup>: **C12M 1/04, C12N 1/00**

(21) Application number: **00106137.3**

(22) Date of filing: **21.03.2000**

(84) Designated Contracting States:  
**AT BE CH CY DE DK ES FI FR GB GR IE IT LI LU  
MC NL PT SE**  
Designated Extension States:  
**AL LT LV MK RO SI**

(30) Priority: **22.03.1999 US 273980**

(71) Applicant:  
**PRAXAIR TECHNOLOGY, INC.  
Danbury, CT 06810-5113 (US)**

(72) Inventor: **Cheng, Alan Tat Yan  
Livingston, New Jersey 07039 (US)**

(74) Representative:  
**Schorer, Reinhard  
Schwan Schwan Schorer  
Patentanwälte  
Elfenstrasse 32  
81739 München (DE)**

(54) **Method and using oxygen to eliminate carbon dioxide poisoning in aerobic fermentation**

(57) A method for carrying out fermentation comprising the steps of providing a vessel which contains a broth comprising a constituent capable of undergoing fermentation, lowering the vessel pressure within the vessel to lower the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure, adding pure oxygen into the vessel to raise the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure therein, and utilizing the pure oxygen to carry out the fermentation of the constituent.

EP 1 038 948 A1

**Description**Technical Field

- 5 [0001] This invention relates generally to a fermentation method and, more particularly, to fermentation method which is driven by an injected gas such as oxygen.

Background Art

- 10 [0002] Fermentation is a chemical change induced by a living organism or enzyme, such as bacteria or the micro-organisms occurring in unicellular plants, which involves the aerobic decomposition of hydrocarbons to produce a desired product along with carbon dioxide. Fermentation systems are used for the production of a large number of products such as antibiotics, vaccines, synthetic biopolymers, synthetic amino acids and edible proteins.

- 15 [0003] In conventional aerobic fermentation, air is supplied in large quantity to provide oxygen for respiration and growth. At the same time, carbon dioxide is stripped off by the remaining air that is not consumed by the biomass (bacteria, fungi, plant cells, etc.). Generally, the oxygen contained in the air bubbles must be dissolved in the broth before the biomass can consume it. Therefore, oxygen dissolution from air is a rate controlling factor. To maintain favorable air dissolution rate, the pressure of the fermenters are typically elevated to several atmospheres.

- 20 [0004] Increased productivity in a fermenter may involve increasing the concentration of the nutrient and biomass. Oxygen demand will accordingly increase in response to the additional nutrient and biomass concentration. More oxygen will be consumed if it is available. Therefore, supplying sufficient air (or oxygen) to the biomass is a major concern. At higher oxygen consumption rate, more carbon dioxide is produced. At some point, the level of carbon dioxide in the fermenter will poison the biomass and become a major problem in the fermentation process. This poisoning occurs when the amount of carbon dioxide being generated during respiration and growth of the biomass is faster than the  
25 removal rate. At a critical level, the excess dissolved carbon dioxide will retard the growth of the biomass. The critical carbon dioxide level is defined as the level of carbon dioxide in the fermentation vessel in which the carbon dioxide no longer serves a beneficial function in fermentation, but rather retards the growth of the biomass.

- 30 [0005] Since the carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust of the fermenter is a much easier measurable value than dissolved carbon dioxide level within the fermenter, it has become an industrial standard to measure the carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust. Therefore, each fermentation process has a certain predetermined critical carbon dioxide concentrate in the exhaust as a reference that the fermentation batches should not exceed. This critical carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust has become a practical measurable limitation as one tries to increase the productivity or biomass concentration.

- 35 [0006] To increase productivity with higher biomass, it has been known in the art to increase the air flow. Increasing the air flow has the advantages of supplying extra oxygen to support denser biomass while stripping out more carbon dioxide. However, there is a practical limit as to the amount of air that can be introduced. Excess air will flood the impeller if the fermenter is mechanically agitated, thus rendering the agitator useless. In airlifted fermenters, it can also fluidize the broth or blow the content out of the fermenters. Therefore, an increase in air flow can only increase the productivity to a very small extent.

- 40 [0007] Other works have suggested the use of pure oxygen to supplement the air when the biomass concentration is high. However, it is believed that simply adding pure oxygen will work in fermentation only if the biomass is resistant to carbon dioxide poisoning. To the most part, the addition of pure oxygen will compound the problem since more carbon dioxide is being generated through respiration and growth of the biomass. Excess carbon dioxide will accumulate if the removal rate is not increased at a rate higher than the carbon dioxide production.

- 45 [0008] It has been known in the art to keep the biomass concentration low enough so that the carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust (as a control method) will not exceed the critical value. Therefore, the carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust is a limiting factor in productivity increase.

- 50 [0009] The art has only proposed solutions relating to increase oxygen dissolution rate while ignoring the effect of carbon dioxide poisoning. The prior art references provided for using oxygen in enrichment or direct injection, but none of them is believed to resolve the problems associated with carbon dioxide poisoning.

- [0010] It is desirable, therefore, to provide a method for carrying out fermentation using oxygen which minimizes the effects of carbon dioxide poisoning.

Summary of the Invention

- 55 [0011] This invention is directed to a method for carrying out fermentation. The method steps involve providing a vessel which contains a broth comprising a constituent capable of undergoing fermentation, lowering the vessel pressure within the vessel to lower the dissolved carbon dioxide level and the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure in the ves-

sel proportional to the lowered vessel pressure, adding pure oxygen into the vessel to raise the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure therein, and utilizing the pure oxygen to carry out the fermentation of the constituent. Preferably, this invention provides for the simultaneous steps of lowering the reactor pressure and adding pure oxygen. This invention is also directed to a method for increasing the biomass concentration in carrying out the fermentation process.

#### Detailed Description of the Invention

[0012] This invention is based on the premise that most processors control the carbon dioxide level in the exhaust of the fermentation vessel. On that basis, the exhaust carbon dioxide level is proportional to the dissolved carbon dioxide level. Notwithstanding this premise, it is believed that the exhaust carbon dioxide level is not always proportional, but rather dependent on the temperature and pressure of the fermenter.

[0013] The reason that the carbon dioxide concentration in the gas exhaust is used for measuring the rate of fermentation and the productivity of fermentation instead of the dissolved carbon dioxide is because the dissolved carbon dioxide level in a sterile reacting broth is not a measurable value as there is not believed to be any presently existing on-line equipment capable of calculating such a value. This invention uses the critical carbon dioxide measured from the exhaust of the fermentation vessel to calculate the critical dissolved carbon dioxide level. By reducing the pressure inside a fermenter, the actual dissolved carbon dioxide level,  $X_{CO_2}$ , will decrease proportionally due to an reduction in carbon dioxide partial pressure:

$$P_{CO_2} = Y_{CO_2} \cdot P = H \cdot X_{CO_2}$$

where

$P_{CO_2}$  = Partial pressure of  $CO_2$

$Y_{CO_2}$  = Mole fraction of  $CO_2$  in the gas phase

$X_{CO_2}$  = Mole fraction of dissolved  $CO_2$  in the liquid phase

H = Henry Law's constant

Therefore, a higher biomass with pure oxygen can be added to boost production. With higher growth and respiration rate, the carbon dioxide level in the exhaust will appear to be higher than the critical carbon dioxide level in the exhaust. However, the dissolved carbon dioxide level remains the same or slightly lower.

[0014] The reduction in fermenter pressure will proportionally reduce the dissolved oxygen level due the reduction of oxygen partial pressure:

$$P_{O_2} = Y_{O_2} \cdot P = H \cdot X_{O_2}$$

where

$P_{O_2}$  = Partial pressure of  $O_2$

$Y_{O_2}$  = Mole fraction of  $O_2$  in the gas phase

$X_{O_2}$  = Mole fraction of dissolved  $O_2$  in the liquid phase

H = Henry Law's constant

To compensate for the reduction in equilibrium oxygen partial pressure, additional pure oxygen is used in this invention through simple oxygen enrichment or direct oxygen injection. Subsequently, higher productivity can be achieved with the same critical dissolved carbon dioxide level but with a higher oxygen consumption rate.

[0015] Reducing the fermenter pressure has the opposite effects of adding pure oxygen. Based on the art, the skilled artisan would not ordinarily employ both techniques to reduce the fermenter pressure and to add pure oxygen. However, contrary to the art, this invention discovered that the degree of influence is different between the two techniques. By using both techniques, one can still dissolved additional oxygen while gaining the benefit of lower dissolved carbon dioxide level in the broth.

[0016] In fact, this invention provides a break through for increasing fermenter productivity beyond the limit posted by the critical carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust. This is achieved through simultaneous reduction in fermenter pressure and addition of pure oxygen.

[0017] To increase the oxygen dissolution rate, fermenters are usually operated at elevated pressure of several atmospheres. Increasing the absolute pressure by a factor of two will be expected to increase the amount of dissolved oxygen also by a factor of two at equilibrium. However, this invention realizes that operating at higher pressure also reduce the ability of the fermenter to remove carbon dioxide. This is because the solubility of carbon dioxide is also

increased at higher pressure. Most fermentation broth are sensitive to carbon dioxide poisoning so that the dissolved carbon dioxide must be maintained below a critical level. Since the level of dissolved carbon dioxide is very difficult to measure, the industry can only monitor the carbon dioxide gas concentration in the exhaust.

[0018] Because of the production limit based on the critical carbon dioxide level, it is generally not possible to increase the productivity (pounds of product per given volume of fermentation broth) at higher biomass level. Higher biomass will generate more carbon dioxide and will also require more oxygen in the fermentation process. Conventional approach to maintain the carbon dioxide gas concentration and to increase oxygen supply is to add more air. However, it is usually impractical or impossible to increase air flow for an optimized fermenter. The excess air can flood the impellers with gas, causing the impeller to malfunction. Most plants are already running air compressors to the maximum and the existing line size and sparge ring opening will also limit the amount of air can supply.

[0019] The present invention uses direct oxygen injection (or enrichment) while operating the fermenter at a lower pressure. By cutting the absolute pressure in half (e.g., from 4 atm to 2 atm, or 3 atm-gauge to 1 atm-gauge), it reduces the equilibrium oxygen concentration in half. However, the reduction in equilibrium oxygen concentration can be compensated by using pure oxygen, which has a driving force of about five times higher than the equilibrium oxygen concentration. Therefore, the pure oxygen will compensate the effect of pressure reduction and also increase the oxygen availability.

### EXAMPLE

#### Control Parameters:

##### [0020]

Pressure = 4 atm

CO<sub>2</sub> measured in exhaust =  $y_1 = 5\%$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Dissolved CO}_2 \text{ (critical, not measured)} &= X_{1,\text{CO}_2} \\ &= Y_{1,\text{CO}_2} P_1 / H \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where

$Y_{1,\text{CO}_2}$  = Critical gas phase carbon dioxide concentration (measured)

$P_1$  = Pressure of the fermenter

$H$  = Henry's law constant

Oxygen consumption = 50 mmole/liter-hr

Available oxygen from air =  $0.21 \cdot 100 \text{ Nm}^3/\text{hr} = 21 \text{ Nm}^3/\text{hr}$

#### Oxygen Case with Higher Productivity:

[0021] In this case, pure oxygen is added to supplement the air. The fermenter pressure is reduced at the same time.

Biomass concentration = 2 x control

Pressure = 2 atm

[0022] By doubling the biomass concentration, the oxygen consumption is also doubled.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Oxygen consumption} &= 2 \times \text{control} = 2 \cdot 50 \\ &= 100 \text{ mmoles/liter-hr} \end{aligned}$$

[0023] At the same time, carbon dioxide generation is also doubled.

CO<sub>2</sub> generated = 2 x control

[0024] The additional oxygen requirement is then satisfied by using pure oxygen:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Available oxygen} &= \text{oxygen from air} + \text{pure oxygen} \\ &= 0.21 \cdot 100 \text{ Nm}^3/\text{hr} + 21 \text{ Nm}^3/\text{hr} \text{ (pure oxygen)} \\ &= 42 \text{ Nm}^3/\text{hr}\end{aligned}$$

[0025] In this invention, it is believed that the critical dissolved carbon dioxide is the primary factor which is actually effecting the biomass activity, not the gas phase carbon dioxide concentration.

[0026] Therefore, it is necessary to keep the dissolved carbon dioxide unchanged.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Dissolved CO}_2 \text{ (critical, not measured)} & \quad (2) \\ &= \text{same as control} = X_{1,\text{CO}_2} = X_{2,\text{CO}_2} \\ &= Y_{2,\text{CO}_2} P_2/H \\ &= Y_{2,\text{CO}_2} (P_1/2)/H\end{aligned}$$

[0027] In contrast to the process in the present state of the art, the maximum allowable gas phase carbon dioxide concentration measured in exhaust can actually be different. The new maximum carbon dioxide concentration allowed in exhaust (calculated) =  $Y_{2,\text{CO}_2} = Y_{1,\text{CO}_2} \cdot 2 = 10\%$

[0028] Therefore, the maximum allowable carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust with 2 atm should be twice as high as the one operating at 4 atm. The actual carbon dioxide concentration measured in exhaust with doubled bio activity =  $5\% \cdot 2 \cdot (100/(100+21)) = 8.26\%$

[0029] As can be seen from above, the actual carbon dioxide concentration measured in the exhaust of 8.26% is less than the 10% new maximum allowable carbon dioxide concentration limit in the exhaust. Therefore, the concentration of the oxygen supplied can be twice the concentration of the biomass (two times as concentrated), and still not increase the carbon dioxide concentration beyond the critical level.

[0030] Accordingly, the biomass concentration can be increased beyond what is normally considered to be a limitation caused by the carbon dioxide concentration in the exhaust. This is accomplished by reducing the fermenter pressure while compensating for the drop in oxygen dissolution with pure oxygen. Note that this invention also contemplates adding credits to the economical benefits of the fermentation process because the compressor power can be cut by at least 50%.

[0031] To take advantage of high oxygen dissolution and fast carbon dioxide removal, it is preferable to operate the fermenter with a pressure of less than 2 atmospheres while injection pure oxygen. The vacuum on the fermenter can be pulled if necessary. Generally, the vessel pressure of this invention can be lowered from up to about 25 atmospheres to any pressure between about 25 atmospheres and about 1 atmosphere. The pressure may be any pressure within this range. For example, the vessel pressure may be lowered to any pressure between about 25 atmospheres to about 1 atmosphere.

[0032] Fermentation products which can be produced by the method of this invention include antibiotics such as penicillin, erythromycin and tetracycline, organic chemicals such as sorbitol and citronellol, organic acids such as citric acid, tartaric acid and lactic acid, amino acids such as L-lysine and monosodium glutamate, polysaccharides such as baker's yeast and xanthan gum, vitamins such as ascorbic acid and riboflavin, and other products including enzymes, insecticides, alkaloids, hormones, pigments, steroids, vaccines, interferon and insulin.

[0033] The same principle may be applied to organic oxidation with air. This can be oxidation of any organic when the gas phase products or byproducts may inhibit the reaction. The inhibition can be due to equilibrium shift or poisoning of the catalyst sites. Reducing the reactor pressure will decrease the equilibrium dissolved level of gaseous products or byproducts. The reduction in oxygen dissolution rate is then compensated by adding pure oxygen.

[0034] It should be understood that the foregoing description is only illustrative of the invention. Various alternatives and modifications can be devised by those skilled in the art without departing from the invention. Accordingly, the present invention is intended to embrace all such alternatives, modifications and variances which fall within the scope of the appended claims.

## Claims

1. A method for carrying out fermentation comprising:

- a. providing a vessel which contains a broth comprising a constituent capable of undergoing fermentation;
- b. lowering the vessel pressure within said vessel to lower the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure and the dissolved carbon dioxide level in the vessel proportional to said lowered vessel pressure;
- c. adding pure oxygen into said vessel to raise said equilibrium oxygen partial pressure therein; and

d. utilizing said pure oxygen to carry out the fermentation of said constituent.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein said lowering the vessel pressure and adding pure oxygen take place simultaneously.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein said vessel pressure is lowered to a pressure of from up to about 25 atmospheres to any pressure between about 25 atmospheres and about 1 atmosphere.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein lowering said vessel pressure results in lowering the dissolved oxygen level and dissolved carbon dioxide level in said vessel.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein adding said pure oxygen into said vessel raises the level of said equilibrium oxygen partial pressure substantially greater than 0.21 atmosphere.

6. A method for increasing the biomass concentration in carrying out fermentation comprising:

- a. providing a vessel which contains a broth comprising a constituent capable of undergoing fermentation;
- b. lowering the vessel pressure within said vessel to lower the equilibrium oxygen partial pressure and the dissolved carbon dioxide level in the vessel proportional to said lowered vessel pressure;
- c. adding pure oxygen into said vessel to raise said equilibrium oxygen partial pressure therein; and
- d. utilizing said pure oxygen to carry out the fermentation of said constituent.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein said lowering the vessel pressure and adding pure oxygen take place simultaneously.

8. The method of claim 6 wherein said vessel pressure is lowered to a pressure of from up to about 25 atmospheres to any pressure between about 25 atmospheres and about 1 atmosphere.

9. The method of claim 6 wherein lowering said vessel pressure results in lowering the dissolved oxygen level and dissolved carbon dioxide level in said vessel.

10. The method of claim 6 wherein adding said pure oxygen into said vessel raises the level of said equilibrium partial oxygen pressure substantially greater than 0.21 atmosphere.



European Patent  
Office

# EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number  
EP 00 10 6137

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
X	CYSEWSKY ET AL.: "Rapid ethanol fermentations using vacuum and cell recycle" BIOTECHNOLOGY AND BIOENGINEERING. INCLUDING: SYMPOSIUM BIOTECHNOLOGY IN ENERGY PRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION., vol. 19, no. 8, 1977, pages 1125-1143, XP002143643 JOHN WILEY & SONS. NEW YORK., US ISSN: 0006-3592 * page 1142, paragraph 5 * * page 1138 *	1-10	C12M1/04 C12N1/00
X	FR 2 317 233 A (WAAGNER BIRO AG) 4 February 1977 (1977-02-04) * page 8, line 31 - line 38 * * page 9, line 28 - line 35; claims 1,6,7,10,11 *	1-10	
X	US 4 444 882 A (SHIMIZU NORIO ET AL) 24 April 1984 (1984-04-24) * column 10, line 4 - line 20; claims *	1,2,6,7	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)
X	PATENT ABSTRACTS OF JAPAN vol. 006, no. 040 (C-094), 12 March 1982 (1982-03-12) & JP 56 158091 A (KOBAYASHI JIRO;OTHERS: 01), 5 December 1981 (1981-12-05) * abstract *	1	C12M C12P C12N
A	DE 42 35 558 C (FISCHTECHNIK FREDELSLOH DR GER) 11 May 1994 (1994-05-11) * claims *	1,6	
A	US 4 959 322 A (SAKAI MARI) 25 September 1990 (1990-09-25) * claims *	1,6	
		-/--	
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search <b>THE HAGUE</b>		Date of completion of the search <b>27 July 2000</b>	Examiner <b>Coucke, A</b>
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document			

EPO FORM 1503 02.02 (Pct021)



European Patent  
Office

# EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number  
EP 00 10 6137

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
A	GB 2 317 169 A (KVAERNER DAVY LTD) 18 March 1998 (1998-03-18) * page 11; claims; figures *	1,6	
X	US 4 846 965 A (CLIFFT RICKY C ET AL) 11 July 1989 (1989-07-11) * claims; figures *	1,2,4,6, 7,9	
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search <b>THE HAGUE</b>		Date of completion of the search <b>27 July 2000</b>	Examiner <b>Coucke, A</b>
<p><b>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</b></p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons &amp; : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p>			

EPO FORM 1503 03.82 (P04001)



**ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT  
ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO.**

EP 00 10 6137

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report. The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on  
The European Patent Office is in no way liable for these particulars which are merely given for the purpose of information.

27-07-2000

Patent document cited in search report		Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
FR 2317233	A	04-02-1977	AT 336517 B	10-05-1977
			AT 519775 A	15-08-1976
			CH 625133 A	15-09-1981
			DE 2627231 A	03-02-1977
			FI 761771 A,B,	04-12-1977
			GB 1515221 A	21-06-1978
			NO 762141 A,B,	10-01-1977
			SE 425631 B	25-10-1982
			SE 7606905 A	08-01-1977
US 4444882	A	24-04-1984	JP 1552563 C	23-03-1990
			JP 57122789 A	30-07-1982
			JP 60018390 B	10-05-1985
			JP 1291057 C	29-11-1985
			JP 57144978 A	07-09-1982
			JP 60015306 B	18-04-1985
			JP 1296994 C	20-01-1986
			JP 57091200 A	07-06-1982
			JP 60018389 B	10-05-1985
			DE 3176062 D	07-05-1987
			EP 0052890 A	02-06-1982
			KR 8701649 B	18-09-1987
JP 56158091	A	05-12-1981	JP 60015305 B	18-04-1985
DE 4235558	C	11-05-1994	NONE	
US 4959322	A	25-09-1990	NONE	
GB 2317169	A	18-03-1998	AU 4127397 A	02-04-1998
			CN 1230162 A	29-09-1999
			WO 9811028 A	19-03-1998
			GB 2331072 A	12-05-1999
US 4846965	A	11-07-1989	US 4898672 A	06-02-1990

EPO FORM P0438

For more details about this annex : see Official Journal of the European Patent Office, No. 12/82

**THIS PAGE BLANK (USPTO)**